

Phil 237: Contemporary Moral Issues
Winter 2021, McGill University

COURSE OUTLINE

Time and Location: M/W/F(ish) 2:35-3:25pm EST via myCourses and Zoom

Professor: Stephanie Leary (stephanie.leary@mcgill.ca)

Course Description

At the heart of three current social and political movements – the Movement for Black Lives (MBL), the #MeToo movement, and the ethical food movement – are moral issues related to race, gender, and species.

The primary moral issues that motivate MBL and #MeToo are obvious and uncontroversial: Black lives deserve equal moral consideration, racism (at both the individual and institutional level) is morally wrong, and engaging in sexual activities with someone without their consent is seriously morally wrong. But there are some moral issues within the vicinity of these two movements that are quite controversial and it's these issues that this course aims to discuss. For example, in relation to MBL, we will ask what is racism exactly, does having implicit racial biases make one racist, and should we adopt affirmative action policies and reparations as a way of counteracting racism? And in relation to #MeToo, we will ask how should we respond to accusations of sexual assault, and what conditions must be met in order for someone to genuinely consent to sex?

Finally, we will then discuss the primary moral issues that motivate the ethical food movement, which are more controversial than those that motivate MBL and #MeToo but are interestingly related: do nonhuman animals deserve equal moral consideration, is our practice of farming animals *speciesist* (akin to racism and sexism), and is it morally wrong to consume meat and other animal products?

Our discussion of these ethical issues will be primarily informed by reading contemporary philosophical articles, but these readings will be supplemented by podcasts, newspaper articles, and documentaries.

(CONTENT WARNING: This course discusses highly sensitive subject matter including racial and sexual violence and students should take proper care while engaging with these materials.)

Course Goals

The overall goals of this course are to improve your ability to think carefully and critically about ethical issues and to express your own views in a clear, well-reasoned way through both writing and conversation.

Lecture Format

Most weeks, there will be one or two pre-recorded lecture videos posted to myCourses on Monday and one live lecture session over Zoom on Wednesday at 2:35-3:25pm (there are a few exceptions – see schedule below). The live sessions will typically involve polling, breakout room discussions, and opportunities for students to ask questions about the material. Occasionally, we will have guest speakers join the live sessions (see schedule below). In order to promote a free exchange of ideas, these live sessions will not be recorded (though any materials used by the professor to help guide the

live session will be made available on myCourses). Regular attendance and participation at the live sessions will be critical for excelling in this course, but it will not count towards your final grade.

Conferences

Every student should register for a conference (which are on Thursdays or Fridays). Conferences will begin Thurs Jan 21st and Fri Jan 22nd and will be devoted to clarifying lecture content, answering student questions, and discussion. In order to promote a free exchange of ideas, conferences will not be recorded.

Assignments & Grades

Students will submit one short writing assignment (20%) and a midterm and final paper (40% each). These assignments are the sole determinants of students' final grade – there is no attendance and participation grade due to the online format. Assignments will be posted two weeks before they are due and students must submit every writing assignment to pass the course.

Language Policy

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Academic Integrity Policy

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures: www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/.